

## 77 – The Warning

“Good work,” praised the Branch Master, who had been waiting nearby with his men.

“We’re not done,” I told him bluntly. “There are still hostages inside and the longer we wait, the more of them the monster eats.”

Holm was standing nearby, watching the exchange.

“What about your friend?” he interjected.

“It must’ve captured him.”

“You’re not worried?”

“Armen is strong and won’t be defeated so easily,” I replied, although I wasn’t entirely sure that the monster wouldn’t crush him like a tin-can.

*Hopefully I can recover him from the suit of armour if that should happen.*

“Do you have a plan for how to exorcise it?” asked the Branch Master.

I shook my head. “Not yet, but I do have an idea for how we can get the people still trapped.”

“How so?”

“We need to break through all of the windows and bring as many torches into the building as we can. It hates light because it limits the power it wields. However, it becomes enraged if we take any of its hostages or use holy magic.”

Holm nodded, backing up my info.

“If we cannot evacuate the hostages without drawing its ire, it will be too dangerous to send people inside.”

“I’ll find a way to limit its power. If it has built a nest, it must have something it’s protecting.”

The Branch Master seemed to mull it over for a long while, until the ‘leader’ I’d rescued came over with a few men by his side.

“Captain?” asked the Branch Master.

“Let’s trust Ryūta on this,” he said and gestured at the people around us, “Look how many he saved.”

“I agree,” Holm added. “I’ve fought alongside him in the past and trust him.”

*Not like I made a great impression the first time... I thought to myself.*

“I already have eight people who are ready to go back in,” said the Captain.

The Branch Master nodded. “Alright, let’s make sure we have people entering through each window as a team of two at least.”

“And bring proper torches,” I added.

He grimaced at the reprimand, then said, “I’ll personally see to it this time.”

As the Captain and Guild Representative left to drum up support and the necessary tools, Holm stayed by my side. “Did you learn more about it when you were inside?”

“A little,” I replied, trying to organise the thoughts in my mind. “Most Haunters I’ve dealt with in the past have had triggers that would enrage them, usually when it involved objects or people important to them before they died.

“This Hunter seems to be more like an animal in that regard. I don’t fully understand why it hates holy magic, but becoming enraged when we liberate its ‘food’ makes sense to me.”

“Some people say it’s a demon. The darkness it exudes seems to verify that.”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “It’s nowhere near as devious as the one we faced in Ochre and lights are good at scaring it away. If it is a type of demon, it must be a less-intelligent sub-type, although I’m willing to wager it is a kind of shadow elemental.”

“Really?”

“The way it’s able to manipulate the darkness around it seems to suggest something of the nature and given that its usage of magic is instinctual, that’s what I’m leaning towards.”

Elementals were just another type of natural creature in this world, although they were closer to spirits than beasts in most regards, while this Hunter seemed to almost straddle that line. Given that it had been released here intentionally to cause panic and disruption during the attack of the Flayed horde, it seemed like a captured beast that’d been dragged far from its real home and was now just trying to survive in a foreign place.

*If Armen could hear me, he’d probably say that I’m empathising with the monster, clouding my judgement.*

“There are some ancient forests that are said to be home to shadow elementals, but none of the ones I’ve heard of are within Arley nor Lacksmey.”

“Someone brought it here,” I told him. “It’s more than likely that they searched far-and-wide for the most disruptive monster they could find.”

“Who would do such a thing?” he wondered out loud.

“The same kind of person who’d release a tide of Flayed Ones on the city.”

Holm nodded with a grim look to his eyes.

“I’ll go help the Branch Master find some proper torches,” he then said and walked away.

After I watched him leave, I found a stool that someone had vacated and planted myself on it. I began trying to meditate a bit to bring back more of my energy, while also testing out a theory I’d come upon.

I imagined the light in my body swirl around in my chest, before flowing along the lines formed by my veins, until eventually reaching my left hand where I purposefully sent a bit into the ring, hoping I could replenish Kōtama’s power in this way.

While keeping this steady flow of light moving through my body, I sent a portion of my mind out to find one of Karasu’s clones in Noble Quarter near the castle. As soon as it connected, my left ear and eye saw and heard what the crow in the sky observed.

A large group of Adventurers and Mercenaries were carving their way through piles of frenzied and eager Flayed Ones, who clamoured and crawled atop one another to reach the fighters. At the fore of their group were Harleigh, Rana, and Renji, acting like the tip of the spear that drove its way into the horde of monsters surrounding the large castle and its walls.

Atop the walls themselves were Royal Guardsmen in gleaming plate, who fought vainly to stem the tide of creatures crawling up the walls to reach the inner courtyard, where a massive melee between the Flayed horde and guards took place.

In the centre of the courtyard fight was a man in massively-bulky bone armour wielding a jagged greatsword, who fought one-on-one against a whirling dervish of elongated crimson nails and blood magic. There was no doubt in my mind that this was the Flayed Noble, as, even from the high vantage point of my Observer, I could tell she was of a unique nature. However, she was hardly scratching the man’s armour, as he swung and blocked deftly with his enormous greatsword, as though it weighed nothing. I wondered who this figure was, but without my Spirit Sight it was impossible to tell, though I guessed him to be a champion of the Prince.

Near their central fight were Flayed Ones like the Illusionist, Gilliam, and Zelser, i.e. transformed-but-sentient Otherworlders, who themselves were a force to be reckoned with. One wielded blood magic like the Noble herself, while the other two were like unholy versions of Vanguard and Paladins.

I moved my familiar’s clone back to view the Otherworlders who were making their way to the contested gate. It wouldn’t be long before they came into contact with the Noble and her servants.

The anxiety of what might happen to my companions broke my meditative state.

*I need to hurry up and finish this*, I told myself, feeling a powerful urge to go fight by their side, even if I’d only be able to provide a bit of support.

A second later, Seramosa emerged next to me, birthed from a ball of flames. I almost jumped out of my seat in surprise.

***“The Boy ran and the Girl followed!”***

*Slow down, what are you talking about?*

***“The Elfin Girl chased after the Boy when he escaped the cell they were in! I tried to appear before her and stop them, but you are too far away for me to manifest! You must chase after them! They are heading into danger!”***

My heart skipped a beat as I realised she was talking about Lukas and Elye.

*Fuck! Why the hell would he run away!?! He promised he would stay until they found a cure!*

***“They are going towards the fighting!”***

*Goddamn it!*

*Karasumany, show me Lukas and Elye!*

**CAW!** replied my familiar in the sky.

My eyes and ears were overtaken by the senses of a duplicate of my Observer, and I felt wind flow against my feathers as I dove down after two figures, who ran through streets littered with dead citizens and Flayed Ones. They were already halfway-through the Artisan Quarter.

*“Lukas! Stop!”*

The Rogue kept running as fast as he could, outpacing the nimble and quick Elfin easily, reminding me that he had an innate ability called ‘Fleetfooted’.

I manoeuvred the crow I was controlling down past the rooftops, diving like an arrow in flight, aiming for him. With a sound like a *slap* my crow body collided with Lukas’ face and made him tumble to the ground, scraping his right knee and elbow as he came to a skidding halt.

Though I couldn’t speak through the familiar’s body, I tried to move it in a way to tell him he had to turn back.

“Ryūta?” he asked as he looked right into my eyes. Then his eyes narrowed and became serious. I’d never seen such a look on his face before. He shook his head. “I can’t go back! I need to warn Rana and them about the trap!”

*What trap?* I wondered.

*“Yuuta!”* Elye exclaimed as she finally caught up to us. *“He does not listen to me!”*

I noticed that as the Elfin spoke frantically, the amethyst necklace bounced around on her neck with her agitated gestures. Whatever Lukas was talking about, it had to be urgent, although part of me feared that it was his curse that was causing some kind of hallucination, making him believe he needed to go to where the Flayed Noble was.

“I won’t go back!” Lukas reiterated. “If the Otherworlders reach the Noble, they’re going to die!”

With some difficulty, I tried to tell him that I understood and would warn them in his place, but given that all I had was a crow body and its flappy wings, it clearly didn’t come across well, as he started brushing himself off, then gave me a nod and ran off again.

With a frustrated yell, Elye chased after him.

I broke the connection to my familiar.

*Keep following them.*

**CAW!**

With a pounding beat in my chest, I got up from the stool and marched over to where the Branch Master was talking to some people, while Holm was carrying an armful of torches over to the entrance of the Barracks.

“I need you to send your fastest runners to the castle and warn the Otherworlders there,” I told the man.

He looked at me in surprise, “Why?”

“They’re going into some kind of trap. Whatever happens, don’t let them get close to the Flayed Noble.”

Within moments, he had selected three slender runners and sent them off with the message.

“Anything else?”

“Prepare the people to enter, we’ve got the torches and we need to shore up this mess now, so we can send reinforcements to the Prince and Adventurers.”